

Service Evaluation

Child Support Enforcement Compliance



An in-depth analysis of non-compliance factors and actions to increase compliance with child support orders within the Child Support Enforcement Department.

Mecklenburg County
Office of Management and Budget

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Executive Summary

The mission of the Child Support Enforcement Department (CSE) is to enhance the quality of life of children and families through the efficient and timely provision of child support services. The success of the program is affected by both the internal strategies and organization of the department and the circumstances of the group of customers of the department who provide support payments.

For Fiscal Year 2015, the County's Executive Team directed the Office of Management and Budget evaluators to conduct a service evaluation of CSE's question regarding child support orders. The purpose of the evaluation was to determine what actions CSE could take to increase compliance with child support orders.

Scope

The service evaluation scope included the primary question, "what action(s) could Child Support Enforcement take to increase compliance with child support orders?", and the secondary question, "what factors contribute to non-compliance with regular and consistent child support payments (as ordered)?" In developing the evaluation plan (roadmap), evaluators conducted several meetings with CSE staff, toured the department offices and reviewed state and national research literature. The information received provided insight to answer the evaluation questions.

Methodology

The methodology used to evaluate the two questions included collecting and analyzing data from multiple sources. One area of data used was an environmental scan, which reviewed the history, trends and relationships in CSE's external environment (i.e. state, federal, judicial agencies, and demographic trends). A literature review of past studies examining the factors in non-compliance and best practices was also included.

Additionally, employees and stakeholder feedback was gathered through focus groups of internal, frontline and supervisory employees and from surveys of internal and external stakeholders. Internal stakeholders surveyed included frontline CSE employees and management. External stakeholders surveyed included directors of other County agencies that work with CSE and directors from other county, state and federal child support agencies. A one-on-one interview with CSE's director was also included.

An operational analysis of the capacity and resources of CSE provided details of the structure and organization of the department. A catalog of the actions and strategies that are currently being used to increase compliance with support orders by the department was also included.

Findings

The various methods used to answer the evaluation questions led evaluators to a set of factors contributing to non-compliance as well as to a set of recommendations (next section). The findings are summarized below.

Finding	Description
Environmental Scan	<p>The national and state infrastructure that supports child support enforcement has evolved since the 1970s to a set of specific enforcement tools that include income withholding and tax interceptions. Incentives based on performance of local agencies began in the 1990s. Nationally, 62.3 percent of child support owed is collected.</p> <p>All Federal funding and compliance issues are handled centrally in North Carolina by the state. In 2015, North Carolina's central child support agency reduced incentive payments to local agencies to support state services.</p>
Literature Review	<p>Strategies for increasing compliance with support orders in the literature focused on employment for noncustodial parents (NCPs), tailoring approaches to compliance based on differences in noncustodial parents, setting reasonable payments and adjusting support orders. Specific, high-impact actions were also found in the literature, ranging from sending noncustodial parents text reminders to geographically targeting enforcement with the aid of Geographic Information Systems (GIS).</p>
Employees and Stakeholder Feedback	<p>Employees and stakeholder feedback concerning internal, departmental issues for non-compliance included high caseloads, insufficient staff and outdated state system technology. Employees and stakeholders suggested actions to increase compliance, including reviewing frontline and supervisor employee alignment of duties to improve efficiency, strengthening external partnerships and reexamining internal processes that hamper case work.</p>
Operational Analysis	<p>The operational analysis showed that CSE is continuing to monitor and adapt to organizational and operational changes in a departmental environment with high workloads. These factors indicate that the available capacity for taking on new actions and strategies is limited.</p>
Review of Current Strategies	<p>Many of the research-based strategies identified in the literature are being implemented to some degree within CSE. There is, however, frustration among staff that the scope of these efforts are too small to achieve the desired improvements in compliance.</p>

Conclusions

Factors that contribute to Non-Compliance

The evaluation question, “What factors contribute to non-compliance with regular and consistent child support payments?” was answered with a combination of the literature review and employees’ feedback. Literature shows that lack of income or money is the most likely reason for non-compliance. This is followed, in order, by (1) disputes over visitation of the child, (2) feelings on the part of the noncustodial parent of a lack of control over how support payments are being spent, (3) claims that the child is not the noncustodial parents to support, and (4) claims by the noncustodial parent not to be responsible for the child’s support.

Factors of non-compliance were further clarified by employees and stakeholder feedback. This feedback added both external (customer-based) and internal (agency-related) factors that contribute to non-compliance. Customer-based factors were identified as unemployment, limited education, illegal activity and/or incarceration, poor relationship between parents, and lack of judicial enforcement. Agency-related factors of non-compliance included high caseloads and outdated state system technology.

Recommendations – Actions to Increase Compliance

All the findings were taken as input for the answer to the question, “What action(s) could Child Support Enforcement take to increase compliance with child support orders?” The recommended actions are organized in groups: **tactical actions** that are lower in cost and in the control of the department; **strategic actions** that may be higher in cost and within the department’s control to implement, but would be slower to bring to completion; and **collaborative actions** which require external resources or partnerships and are more complex to implement.

Tactical Actions

- Review internal appointment and call policies.
 - Alleviate distractions and better use employee’s time.
 - Better time management and focused time for caseworkers.
- Create a community map of services for customers.

Strategic Actions

- Engage the County’s Human Resources - Learning and Development team on departmental morale and work styles.
- Continue to monitor for grant opportunities for employment programs that could address the pressing factor of non-compliance.
- Investigate low-cost methods to integrate text or email reminders-to-pay.

Collaborative Actions

- Investigate enhanced cooperation strategies with the Social Security Office.
- Seek out and expand partnerships with existing recruitment/employment agencies.
- Build on work with the Employer Roundtable to form a joint committee with City and County Human Resources and other organizations that conduct job fairs.

- Form a joint committee to include County, City, private and non-profit groups to help focus the public's attention on CSE issues.
- Work with County Human Resources to conduct a review of frontline and supervisor employee alignment of duties.
- Coordinate the review with capacity modeling project conducted by the County Manager's Business Process Management division.
- Continue involvement with evolving County efforts around workforce development.
- Develop test case for targeting geographic areas where there are concentrations of noncustodial parents who have not complied with support orders.

Scope of the Evaluation

The service evaluation was focused on the primary question, “what action(s) could Child Support Enforcement take to increase compliance with child support orders?” In Fiscal Year 2015, Child Support Enforcement leadership submitted the question with the intention of understanding the options available to improve compliance with support orders.

The secondary question, “what factors contribute to non-compliance with regular and consistent child support payments (as ordered)?” provides a framework for organizing and focusing the evaluation.

It was important for evaluators to understand all the components of the Child Support Enforcement operations and develop an evaluation plan (roadmap) to follow. In developing the evaluation plan, evaluators worked with CSE staff to identify stakeholders and develop logic models that describe the service within the department. In addition to understanding the processes and expected outcomes derived from the logic model data, evaluators conducted several meetings with CSE staff, toured the department offices, and reviewed state and national research literature. The information obtained provided insight to answer the evaluation questions. The evaluation plan included researchable questions, information sources, evaluation design strategy, data collection and analysis methods, and limitations. For a summary of the evaluation plan, see Appendix A.

In Scope

To provide a comprehensive review of factors contributing to non-compliance and their impact on compliance with child support orders, the evaluation scope included these questions:

- What data are available?
- What are key compliance strategies?
- What strategies are being used by CSE?
- What is the capacity for new initiatives at CSE?
- What are compliance rates in comparable communities?

Out-of Scope

Although a high-level comparison with other jurisdictions was included, the evaluation excluded an in-depth analysis of internal organization and structure in comparable jurisdictions.

Intended Users

The intended audience for this report includes Mecklenburg County’s Executive Team, CSE’s leadership, and other jurisdictions. The Executive Team will use the results of the evaluation to make informed decisions about the department’s activities to increase compliance with support orders. CSE’s leadership and employees will use the provided information to make management decisions and utilize best practices. Other local governments and child support agencies will be able to use the methodology and results from this evaluation as a benchmark for future study.

Background and History

The Federal Government began child support programs under Title IV-D of the Social Security Act¹ in 1975 and established program goals to secure support from non-custodial parents for their children, helps families remain self-sufficient, and prevents families from requiring public assistance. Originally, the enactment of Title IV-D was intended to address the dependence on public assistance by families with an absent parent. The child support program was designed to use child support payments to reimburse federal assistance programs, in particular, the program now called Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF). Over time, the number of TANF cases has decreased nationally, shifting the focus of the child support program to the effective delivery of child support services and promoting responsible parental support of children.²

Every state is required to administer a program for child support and must offer the federally required services. In North Carolina, the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services administers the Child Support Services program. Program expenses incurred by State receive reimbursement at a rate of 66 percent from the Federal Government in addition to incentive payments for meeting targets aligned to performance measures.

Changing Tools for Enforcement

At the time the child support program began in the mid-1970s, states became involved in issues of child paternity and were required to: (1) establish a parent locator service, (2) establish paternity, (3) establish support orders, (4) enforce child support orders, and (5) make service available to families receiving welfare payments as well as those who are not receiving welfare payments.

In the 1980s, Federal legislation³ increased state involvement in child support by requiring states to begin withholding income of delinquent child support payments. Additionally, states were required to implement automated monitoring of pay and tax refunds, and required timely notices of support payment collection to custodial parents.

While legislation and measures became important for effective enforcement, tools have also evolved since the beginning of Federal guidelines in child support. The most commonly used tools beyond income withholding include:

- Passport denial
- Professional and driver's license revocation
- Consent orders
- Notice of non-compliance
- Tax Intercept
- Unemployment benefits withholding

¹ Social Security Amendments of 1974 (Public Law 93-647), Child Support and Establishment of Paternity Program through Title IV-D of the Social Security Act, January 1975.

² Revising State Child Support Incentive System, North Carolina Program Evaluation Division, July 2014.

³ Omnibus Reconciliation Act of 1981 (Public Law 97-378), 1981; Child Support Amendments of 1984 (Public Law 98-378), 1984.

- Show Cause Motion for Contempt for Failure to Pay
- Show Cause Motion for Contempt for Failure to Provide Medical Insurance or Reimburse Uninsured Medical Expenses
- Bank levies
- Lottery intercepts

Administrative Changes in North Carolina Child Support

Until 2010, federally mandated child support activities in North Carolina were administered by the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services Division of Social Services, through 30 program sites distributed around the state. However, in 2009, the North Carolina General Assembly directed each Child Support Enforcement (CSE) department to be administered by local county governments, effective July 1, 2010. As a result of this directive, Mecklenburg County Board of County Commissioners (BOCC) voted to bring the Child Support Enforcement Services in-house and directed County staff to submit the transition plan to the State. The CSE department became part of Mecklenburg County in July 2010.

In Fiscal Year 2016, North Carolina passed legislation allowing the State to retain 15 percent of earned incentive funds. State Child Support Services will retain that amount of earned incentive funds collected by all counties in North Carolina. The change is intended to enhance centralized services provided by the State and promote the overall effectiveness of all county-managed CSE operations.

Mecklenburg CSE

In the transition to becoming a County department, the Mecklenburg Board of County Commissioners (BOCC) approved a staffing level of up to 98 employees, which included three staff attorney positions. The BOCC also allocated \$200,000 from fund balance for the recruitment of the Department Director and other vacant positions.

County Human Resources worked with CSE as it was transitioning to a County agency to review their staffing organization. Casework teams were reorganized teams with a “generalist” approach.

“The rationale for the generalist programs... is that practitioners should view problems holistically and be prepared to plan interventions aimed at multiple levels of systems related to client concerns. Similarly, client goals and needs should suggest appropriate interventions, rather than interventions inspiring a selection of compatible goals. Client systems range from micro systems (individuals, couples, families and groups) to ...macro systems (organizations, institutions, communities, regions and nations).”⁴

⁴ Direct Social Work Practice: Theory and Skills, 2010 (Dean Hepworth, Ronald Rooney, Glenda Dewberry Rooney, Kim Strom-Gottfried, Jo Ann Larsen)

This move to the generalist model of case management reflects the recent thinking in the field. The approach is designed to position organizations to take a broad approach and deliver services in a way that can produce better outcomes.

Mecklenburg County Child Support Enforcement is now the largest county-managed office in North Carolina, with a staff of 100 full-time employees and a total case load exceeding 36,000 (as of Fiscal Year 2015).

Methodology

A mixed methods approach was used to collect and analyze both quantitative and qualitative data to understand the evaluation questions. The mixed method approach ensures a comprehensive account of what is occurring within the program. This also ensures integrity of findings and gives depth to the data.

Existing Data Sources

The evaluators identified existing data sources related to the Child Support Enforcement Department. The identification of existing data was done to determine what data should be collected during the evaluation, to avoid duplication of previous activities, and to shape the data collection design of the evaluation.

Existing data sources that were determined to be valuable included child support enforcement best practices, programs, and current departmental data such as:

- Budget and expense data from 2011 – 2016
- Federal Office of Child Support Enforcement data via the N.C. Client Services Data Warehouse

Environmental Scan

An environmental scan was completed to include a review of the history, trends and relationships in CSE's external environment (i.e. state and federal agencies including the judicial system, demographic trends). Information was included from national, state and local websites. The N.C. Program Evaluation Division provided information on the structure of CSE's administration within North Carolina. The U.S. Census Bureau provided contextual information on national compliance with support orders.

Literature Review

A targeted review of the existing research data on this topic provides data-driven proven strategies and answers. The review of the literature focused on the factors in non-compliance and best practices, actions/strategies used to increase compliance. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services was useful in the provision of the Compendium of Best Practices in Child Support – 2008. Reports were also included from the University of Maryland, Western Michigan University and the Virginia Department of Child Support Enforcement.

Stakeholders

The evaluators utilized data collection methods that would allow internal and external stakeholders to share their perceptions and experiences of Child Support Enforcement to complement and add value to other data collected. Focus groups, a survey of key internal and external stakeholders and an interview with the Department director were used to obtain stakeholders' perceptions and experiences.

Employee Focus Groups

Focus groups are good way of understanding what individuals believe to be true of a program. Three focus groups, two with frontline case managers and one with case supervisors and team lead employees were conducted with 28 CSE employees in July 2015. Evaluators led the focus groups using the logic model framework as a guide. The framework is useful in clarifying what a program or project intends to do, and, in the longer term, what it hopes to accomplish. Feedback obtained from the meetings served dual purposes: (1) provided qualitative feedback on the evaluation question and (2) helped to complete a logic model with respect to the evaluation questions.

The focus group meetings provided CSE employees the opportunity to provide their opinion on non-compliance issues and actions the department could take to increase compliance with support orders. Using the framework of external factors, resources, activities, outputs, outcomes and impacts, employees could enhance work performed. At the conclusion of both focus groups, the data was analyzed to identify overarching themes from the focus group participants and summarized for the report.

Surveys and Interviews

Surveys provide the opportunity to engage numerous stakeholders efficiently and allow stakeholders to provide feedback at their convenience. The evaluators developed the surveys to assess attitudes of internal stakeholders, specifically CSE employees, and to assess external stakeholders, including agency partners and community partners. Using an on-line survey, both stakeholder groups were asked five open-ended questions about non-compliance factors and actions that could be taken to increase compliance with support orders (See Appendix C).

Internal stakeholders included the 28 participants in the focus groups (who were offered the survey as a follow-up to provide additional feedback privately) and management employees of CSE. External stakeholders included state and federal agency contacts, directors of other Child Support Enforcement Departments within North Carolina, and senior staff from other Mecklenburg County agencies who conduct business with CSE. Identified stakeholders had three weeks to respond to the surveys. The response rate was 23 percent to the internal stakeholders' survey and 40 percent to the external stakeholders' survey.

When the survey closed, the evaluators read through the data to observe patterns. Each of the survey responses were assigned broad themes. A secondary theme was applied in the analysis if there were multiple themes in one response. After reading all responses and assigning themes, evaluators sorted the data by theme to determine the most prevalent thoughts. The internal stakeholder information was summarized in paragraph format. For the external stakeholder group, short narratives were written for each theme to give a description of what stakeholders shared and a few quotes selected to demonstrate the theme.

In addition, the CSE Director received an individual face-to-face interview using questions from the survey to guide discussion. The interviews gave the director an opportunity to share her experiences and for evaluators to learn more about the evaluation questions. In-depth information received from the director interview was included with internal stakeholder survey responses and used in the analysis of data.

Operational Analysis

Evaluators sought to understand the department's current capacity and approach to non-compliance through their operations. To accomplish this, senior employees of CSE presented an overview of the department's operation to evaluation staff in two separate meetings.

Subsequently, evaluation staff followed up with questions and held discussions with employees within CSE and in supporting County departments. This review included capacity and resources available to the agency in the context of their customer base, peer agencies and recent performance.

Current Strategies

Actions and strategies currently used and most directly align to the increase in compliance with support orders were also include in this evaluation. Summaries of the approaches are listed, with context on how those approaches align with best practices found in the literature for addressing non-compliance with support orders.

Findings

As outlined in the *Methodology Section*, data were gathered and analyzed from a number of different sources to inform this evaluation. The results are organized below as an environmental scan, literature review, employee and stakeholder feedback, operational analysis and current strategies.

Environmental Scan

An environmental scan reviews the history, trends and relationships in the external environment to include national trends, funding agency decisions, as well as socio-economic factors in the community. This section includes contextual information that helps in understanding the evolution of the service and the tools and funding that make the service possible.

Context Nationally

A study by the US Census Bureau in 2011 gives some national context for the typical compliance rates with support orders.

“About three-quarters (74.1 percent) of custodial parents who were due child support in 2011 received either full or partial payments, including 43.4 percent who received full payments.

About 62 percent of the \$37.9 billion in child support due in 2011 was reported as received, averaging \$3,770 per year per custodial parent who was due support.

About half (48.9 percent) of all custodial parents had both legal or informal child support agreements, and custodial mothers were more likely to have agreements (53.4 percent) than custodial fathers (28.8 percent).”⁵

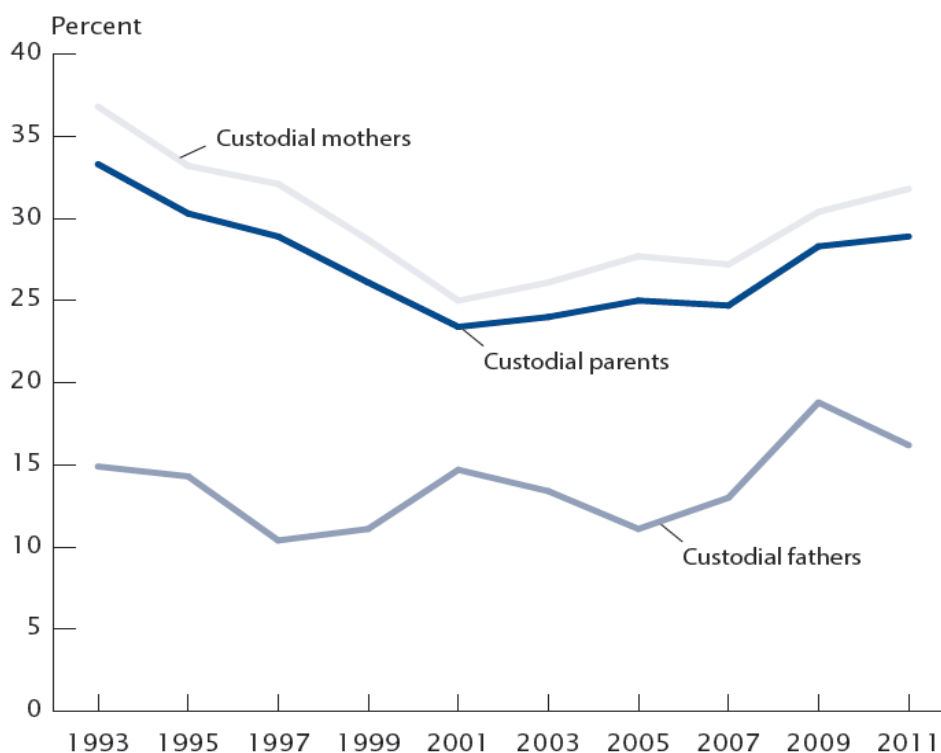


The same report showed the effect of the recession⁶ on the poverty status of custodial parents.

⁵ Custodial Mothers and Fathers and Their Child Support: 2011, US Census Bureau

⁶ Recession dates December 2007 to June 2009, National Bureau of Economic Research.

Poverty Status of Custodial Parents: 1993–2011



Note: For information on confidentiality protection, sampling error, nonsampling error, and definitions, see www.census.gov/prod/techdoc/cps/cpsmar12.pdf.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, April 1994 to 2012.

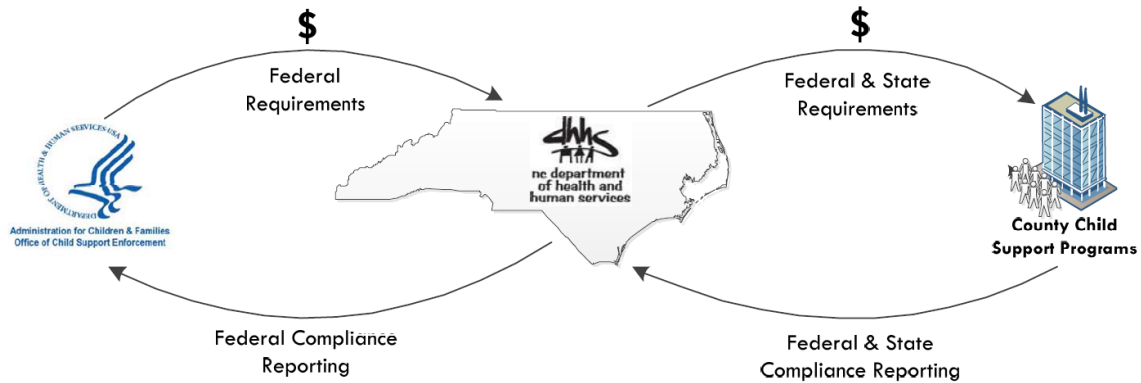
The graph above shows the increase in custodial parents' poverty from the end of 2007 through the middle of 2009, when poverty of custodial fathers began to see a significant decline.

Context in North Carolina

The State is central to Child Support Enforcement funding and reporting in North Carolina. Federal requirements and compliance reporting are administered by the State of North Carolina. Therefore, the State is an essential funding partner of the local Child Support Enforcement Department. The state office for Child Support Services is located within the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, which monitors County offices and distributes Federal funding to those offices.

The graphic below, from the North Carolina Program Evaluation Division, illustrates the flows of funding from the Federal Administration for Children & Families, Office of Child Support Enforcement.⁷

⁷ [Revising State Child Support Incentive System Could Promote Improved Performance of County Programs, N.C. Program Evaluation Div., 2014](#)



Source: Program Evaluation Division based on federal regulations and North Carolina state law.

In addition to administration of Federal requirements, compliance and funding distribution to County agencies in the state, the state has the option to adjust the payout of incentives to local agencies, with legislative approval.

In 2009, the North Carolina General Assembly directed each Child Support Enforcement (CSE) office to be administered by local county governments. Child Support Enforcement became a Mecklenburg County department July 1, 2010.

Effective in Fiscal Year 2016, North Carolina passed legislation allowing the State to retain 15 percent of earned incentive funds. State Child Support Services will retain that amount of earned incentive funds collected by all counties in North Carolina.

Literature Review

This section summarizes the best practices and research on the two evaluation questions: What factors contribute to non-compliance with regular and consistent child support payments (as ordered)? And, what action(s) could Child Support Enforcement take to increase compliance with child support orders? Non-compliance factors are addressed first since that informs actions to increase compliance.

Non-compliance Factors

In the literature, factors of non-compliance are organized around two areas:

- Factors of income, attitudes and relationships within and among family members
- Factors related to specific case characteristics

Factors related to income, attitudes and relationships are summarized below:

Studies have shown that lack of income or money is the most likely reason for non-payment. This is followed, in order, by disputes over visitation of the child, feeling a lack of control over how support payments are being spent, claims that the child is not theirs to support, and claims not to be responsible for the child's support.⁸

The size of the support order is one of the most important case characteristics for non-compliance. Studies have shown support orders exceeding 20% of an obligor's income (those owing support) result in lower payment compliance and, ultimately, arrears accumulation.

"...there is a point at which a child support order is too high and beyond an obligor's ability to pay. These high orders are ineffective as they result in lower, not higher, collections, and lead to arrearage accumulation.

*Policy and program changes centering on a reasonable support order should be implemented in the best interests of custodians, children, and obligors, as well as state agencies."*⁹

Other specifics of case characteristics have shown to either predict better or worse compliance with support orders.

Two situations show **increases in expected collections**:

- Cases that have automatic wage withholdings in place have collections rates 27 percent higher than cases without withholdings in place.
- Orders established in non-metro counties show a nine percentage point advantage in collections over orders established in metro counties.

⁸ A Study of Reasons for Non-Payment of Child Support by Non-Custodial Parents, Western Michigan University 2015

⁹ Reasonable Child Support Orders: The Relationship between income and collections, University of Maryland 2014

Several characteristics are associated with **lower expected collections**:

- In cases where incomes of the obligor are imputed (attributed rather than shown to be earned) there is a 17 percentage point decrease in expected collections.
- In cases where the address of the obligor is unknown, expected collections are 12 percent lower.
- Support cases are sometimes closed briefly due to administrative errors or other procedural issues. If cases are closed, even for a short period of time, collections drop 10 percentage points.
- Cases with a single obligor having multiple obligations, the drop in collections averages eight percentage points.
- When the obligor is the mother, collections are lower by seven percentage points.

Compliance Strategies

To address the primary question: What action(s) could Child Support Enforcement take to increase compliance with child support orders? the literature review highlights best practices and various strategies.

Job Skills / Placement

Employment and job skill programs emerged as the most prominent strategy for increasing compliance with support orders. In fact, in the research one finding was that “poorly educated men with limited work experience face challenges gaining employment, meeting their support obligations and maintaining relationships with their partners and children.”⁸

“Employment is clearly a cornerstone of any credible effort to increase support payments for low-income noncustodial parents.”

In lessons learned from programs in recent years, it was noted that, “since child support agencies do not have expertise in the delivery of employment services, they should partner with workforce programs and other agencies that do specialize in providing job readiness services, job training, job development, job placement, and job retention.” However, it is also recommended that child support agencies “take an active role in managing programs that engage noncustodial parents in employment services.”

The research also found that the noncustodial parents are difficult to serve and that the right mix of services and sufficient staffing to energetically address these issues is challenging to achieve.

Overall, researchers found that “employment is clearly a cornerstone of any credible effort to increase child support payments for low-income noncustodial parents.”¹⁰

How much difference can effective job placement programs make?

“[A] large-scale, five-year national demonstration of employment programs for unemployed noncustodial parents in eight states ... began in September 2012, and uses

¹⁰ Toolkit: Workforce Programs for Child Support Populations, Center for Policy Research January 2014

random assignment techniques. [P]reliminary findings from some site specific studies are promising:

Texas's NCP Choices program found employment impacts in the treatment group of 21 percent even after a year, and relative to the comparison group, Noncustodial parents paid their child support 47 percent more often and paid \$57 more per month, for a 51 percent increase in total collections.

Colorado's Parents to Work program found that relative to the comparison group, participants had significantly higher rates of earnings, less economic decline due to the 2008/2009 economic recession, and that the percentage of child support due that was paid increased significantly from 36.6 to 41.3 percent in the treatment group, but was unchanged in the comparison group (28.2% versus 27.5%). Colorado's Parents to Work program [also] resulted in better employment and earning outcomes for the treatment group that translated into improvements in the amount and regularity of child support that was paid (41.3% of what was owed for treatment group versus 27.5% for the comparison group), as well as generating substantial additional regional earnings and sales/revenue.

Participants in the employment programs offered in the New York Strengthening Families Through Stronger Fathers Initiative earned 22 percent more and paid 38 percent more in child support than did a comparable group of fathers who did not receive the intervention.”¹¹

Case Stratification

Another approach related in the literature to increase compliance with support orders is case stratification.

“...[T]here does not seem to be one effective strategy for NCPs with low payment compliance due to factors such as unemployment, incarceration, or disabilities, among other barriers.

It is now generally accepted that inability, rather than unwillingness, is the reason for non-payment of child support for many NCPs, particularly those whose incomes are low or whose recent employment is periodic or non-existent.

Hence, punitive enforcement strategies will likely not be effective in improving payment compliance among this population.

Some state and local agencies have begun to implement a strategy known as case stratification to address the varying levels of payment compliance among NCPs.

Case stratification exemplifies the concept that one size does not fit all by encouraging agencies to customize their enforcement methods by case type.

¹¹ [Toolkit: Workforce Programs for Child Support Populations, Center for Policy Research January 2014](#)

Instead of providing all NCPs with the same type of communication and enforcement style regardless of individual situations, case stratification allows caseworkers to individualize their technique based on the type of case.”¹²

Stratification of factors that impact noncustodial parent ability to pay child support fall into two categories: (1) Relationship Indicators (amount of contact noncustodial parent had with children, whether or not parents were married or lived together, age of youngest child etc.) and (2) Financial Indicators (noncustodial parent's salary, employment history, contact information, etc.). When cases are stratified and partnered with more intensive case management services, (i.e., frequent contacts by case managers or financial counselors) there are significant differences in collections among noncustodial parents who receive such services compared to those who do not receive services.

To improve collections, stratification could also be used to review and target sub-groups of noncustodial parents. For instance, noncustodial parents who consented to budgeting and parenting assistance had significantly better payment records. Judicial intervention was also shown to be helpful in obtaining cooperation with noncustodial parents who need case manager assistance. In fact, based on research, there was a difference in the rate of payment of nearly six percent between those noncustodial parents for whom case managers were able to conduct interviews and provide services or intensive case monitoring, and a control group noncustodial parents who had no case manager contact.¹³

Payment history profiles can vary significantly between noncustodial parents with specific characteristics (either of personal characteristics or case characteristics). Knowing and understanding what these factors are can lead to more successful targeted interventions based on stratification approaches. When such approaches are applied, for some cases, large differences in collections results in:

- Access to cars and license (lower compliance among noncustodial parents without cars or driving licenses)
- Employment (higher compliance among employed)
- Instate/Interstate cases (lower compliance for interstate cases)
- Marital status (lower compliance among unmarried/never married noncustodial parents)
- Whether they received “Personal Service of Process” (personal service increases compliance)

Setting Reasonable Orders

Orders exceeding 20 percent of an obligor’s income were shown as resulting in lower payment compliance and, ultimately, greater arrears accumulation. Recent initiatives at the State and Federal level have begun to address the size of orders and the status of accumulation of arrears

¹² Maryland Child Support Case Stratification Pilot November 2010 – April 2011 University of Maryland

¹³ The Right Track Project, Virginia Department of Child Support Enforcement, 2007

during incarceration. Addressing the size of orders and the accumulation of arrears during incarceration has become a standard strategy in increasing compliance.

Considerations growing from this and similar studies include whether the common practice of entering default orders based on calculated minimums or hypothetical earning capacity are effective.

“Orders that are retroactive, often covering many years back to the child’s birth, are also questioned. These retroactive orders are not usually in the interest of the litigants, the child, the court or the child support enforcement system. While legally permissible, these orders are now believed to create an insurmountable roadblock to compliance.

Overwhelmed by a debt that will never be paid (particularly when coupled with interest or penalty charges), the obligor abandons any attempt at payment and the IV-D program is saddled with larger arrears and poorer performance statistics.”¹⁴ (IV-D refers to Title IV-D of the Social Security Act, which required the provision of child support services.)

Targeted Actions

While much of the literature tends to focus on holistic approaches like addressing job skills and employment or stratifying cases for individualized interventions, some projects to increase compliance with support orders are centered on targeted approaches that have the potential for implementation in other jurisdictions. These targeted actions have aimed at improving compliance using a variety of approaches not already mentioned.

Some of those approaches are summarized here¹⁵:

- A program in Washington State engaged employers from various sectors and encouraged them to enroll in Electronic Transfer Fund (ETF) and new hire reporting. This creates a robust database of employees who are noncustodial parents. The data is a tool to boost the collection of ordered support.
- Early communication with noncustodial parents for payment reminders in a non-adversarial manner is a strategy used by several suburban Atlanta agencies.
- Lancaster County, Pennsylvania used GIS software for Sheriffs to focus enforcement efforts in zip codes with high concentrations of delinquent Noncustodial parents.
- Weekly monitoring of payments was a program that showed some promise among Hispanic/Latino populations in Alabama.
- Several studies indicated that noncustodial parents who receive personal Service-of-Process has been shown to be more likely to pay a greater portion of the support amount. This involves being served support orders in person, by officials such as Sheriff Deputies.

¹⁴ A Practical Guide: Making Child Support orders Realistic and Enforceable, National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, 2008

¹⁵ Compendium of Best Practices in Child Support – 2008, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

Literature Review Summary

A summary of the findings is below, organized by the two evaluation questions.

Non-Compliance Factors

What factors contribute to non-compliance with regular and consistent child support payments (as ordered)?

Lack of resources is the reason that most noncustodial parents do not pay child support.

Disputes over visitation and control of the ways funds are spent. Another major set of reasons for non-compliance involve **disputes over the child's parentage** and the responsibility for the child's support.

Size of the order is an important predictor of compliance. Support orders that exceed 20 percent of income are associated with lower rates of compliance.

Specifics of the case that indicate compliance also include issues like whether **automatic wage withholding** is in place.

Compliance Strategies

What action(s) could Child Support Enforcement take to increase compliance with child support orders?

Employment for noncustodial parents and tailoring case management approaches based on differences in noncustodial parents (stratification).

Setting reasonable payments and making adjustments in orders that prevent noncustodial parents from feeling that there is no hope of ever fulfilling child support payment obligations.

Specific, high-impact strategies ranging from issuing text message reminders to pay thus focusing on areas of higher non-payment using GIS technology.

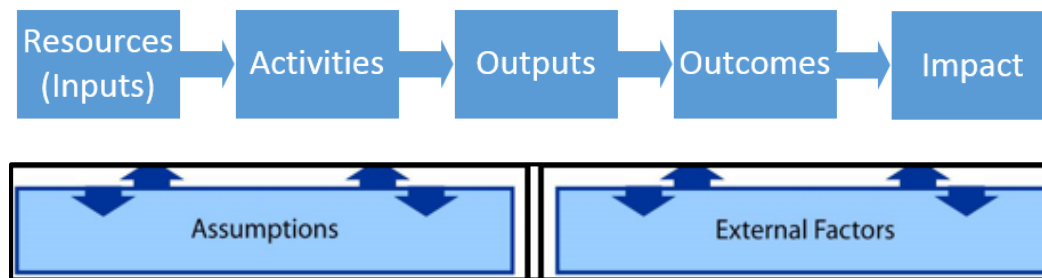
Focus Group and Stakeholder Feedback

In addition to the literature review, employees' and stakeholders' perspectives on the evaluation questions were incorporated into this evaluation. To accomplish this, three focus groups with frontline and supervisory employees were conducted with one group of supervisors and team leads and two groups of caseworkers representing all teams.

A survey of key internal and external stakeholders and an interview with the Department director were also conducted so as to incorporate perspectives into the analysis of the operation (survey instrument in Appendix C).

Focus Groups

Focus group feedback was also used to work through a logic model of the overall operation of the department. A logic model is a depiction of a program showing what the program will do and what it is to accomplish. It creates a series of "if-then" relationships that, if implemented as intended, lead to desired outcomes (a more detailed logic model for program action in Appendix D).



Assumptions can influence the department's decisions and daily operations. When asked to describe assumptions about Child Support Enforcement, employees shared their beliefs of how the department is perceived by custodial and noncustodial parents, attorneys, the community, the County and from within the department. Some of the assumptions are listed below:

Assumptions

- Attorneys presume CSE caseworkers do everything including negotiations and mediation before going to court
- CSE is "against" noncustodial parents
- CSE advocates for moms
- CSE represent the client rather than the agency
- CSE gets more results when going to court
- Noncustodial and custodial parent are non-cooperative
- Employees are experts in the generalist role
- The County will look at Child Support Enforcement as being able to fund its operation because goals are met

Employees shared their beliefs of how the department is perceived by custodial and noncustodial parents, attorneys, the community, the County and from within the department.

Employees provided a number of resources that employees perceived as not currently invested in the department, which would be beneficial. Items the County could obtain are:

Resources Needed

- Payment machines (kiosks) that accept child support payments located throughout the County
- Upper management support (this was suggested broadly as a needed resource without specific examples)
- Employment resources for noncustodial and custodial parents (examples: job placement, training, referrals to employers)
- Community map of resources for customers (to cover a range of services including employment, health, food aid, emergency assistance, violence prevention, etc.)
- Partnerships and referral agencies (Customers present with a wide range of challenges. Employees expressed a desire to have more direct partnering agencies to which they could refer customers.)

External factors affect the department's success and have a major influence on the achievement of outcomes. The department has relatively little control of these factors. Employees shared perspectives of external factors and potential challenges facing customers and CSE employees.

External Factors

- Court processes (generally, challenges with processes that were rigid or had very strict requirements)
- Criminal records (of some noncustodial parents) that hamper employment and therefore limit ability to comply with support orders
- Employers (related to lack of cooperation or compliance with requests for information)
- Legislation (legal requirements that hamper CSE work or make determining parentage overly difficult)
- Illegal activity (by some noncustodial parents)
- Targets determined by the State (seen as overly difficult to achieve or too often adjusted upward)
- Noncustodial parents' deaths and the estate claims made by the State
- State and county budgets (limited funding)
- Technology (particularly issues with state systems)
- Unemployment (both among noncustodial parents and the overall unemployment rate)

In describing the daily activities of a Child Support Enforcement team, employees communicated the need for new activities to ensure the success of the department. New activities that are considered within the departments control are:

Activities

- Better (enhanced/strengthened) working relationship with Social Security Office
- Implement DISC work style assessment (group dynamics)

- Reschedule missed appointment times to improve process
- Institute a new program for females, e.g., "Mother's Initiative"
- Improve Qflow process alerts
- Establish walk-in days versus appointment days
- Change team structure to specialized caseworkers
- Incorporate a more developed in-house call center, so there is some management of direct access to Generalists and to better manage communications

Outputs

Contextual indicators often provide understanding to the influences on work performance. As part of the analysis, employees suggested the department obtain and report out on indicators such as: number of layoffs, the unemployment rate, package completion, and noncustodial parent interaction with children. These suggested indicators were perceived to have a direct effect on the caseloads and dollars collected annually. Employees also advised that some of the current indicators are outside of their control and the department should focus more so on those within their control.

Outcomes

Outcomes are the direct result of the resources and activities provided for custodial parents, noncustodial parents, employees, or the organization. Employees were forthcoming in offering short-, medium-, and long-term outcomes. These categories reflect the logic model theory of change that moves from learning to action to longer-term impacts on conditions. Some of the outcomes are categorized below.

Outcomes		
Short-Term (Learning)	Medium-Term (Action)	Long-Term (Conditions)
County Government understanding of CSE department contribution	Better alignment of [employee] duties within CSE	Better relationships between parents (noncustodial and custodial parents)
Increase community engagement/partnerships	Decrease employee burnout	Breaking out of generational poverty cycle
Increase in job skills	Improve customer service	Financial support for children
Increase in self-respect among customers	Improve education efforts at churches, public service announcements	Jobs for noncustodial parents
Parents improved attitudes	Improve morale of CSE employees	Self-sufficiency/independence
Willingness to implement frontline employee ideas	Improve relationship of noncustodial parents with CSE	
	Merit raises for employees when targets met	
	Noncustodial parent pays child support on a regular basis	
	Improve noncustodial and custodial parent communications	

Stakeholder Survey

Evaluators developed a survey to assess internal and external stakeholder attitudes of CSE. Survey participants were notified that all responses would be grouped and their responses would not be identifiable in the final report. The questions were the same on both surveys, but for reporting purposes, the responses were separated into internal and external groups.

The survey addressed factors of non-compliance with support orders, goals and challenges of child support offices, resources that could benefit the evaluation, and initiatives that would be beneficial for increasing compliance in the County (the survey instrument is available in Appendix C).

Internal Stakeholders

All participants in focus group meetings (caseworkers, team leads and caseworker supervisors) were also included in a survey made available online. In addition, department management within CSE were also surveyed.

The survey was distributed electronically to 35 individuals. Replies were received from eight, for a 23 percent response rate. Mecklenburg County's Child Support Enforcement Director was asked the same survey questions in an individual interview.

External stakeholders

Directors of County departments that work with CSE, state and other jurisdictions' Child Support officials were surveyed. The surveys were sent to 15 individuals with six responses for a response rate of 40 percent.

Key Internal Stakeholder Feedback

Survey results highlighted employees' perceptions on factors that contribute to non-compliance as well as goals, challenges and new initiatives. Responses from internal stakeholder survey results are organized below.

Factors that contribute to non-compliance:

- Unemployment of noncustodial parents
- Incarceration (of some) noncustodial parents
- Lack of judicial enforcement
- Poor relationships between parents
- Visitation restrictions set by custodial parents

Ultimate goal(s) of Child Support Enforcement Offices:

- Promote healthy family structure
- Collect child support
- Establish support orders
- Financial stability for children

Challenges facing Child Support Enforcement Offices now and in the future:

- Large caseloads
- Need for additional staff
- Outdated technology (particularly of state data systems)

Ground breaking initiatives that would be beneficial to increasing compliance in Mecklenburg County:

- Workforce programs
- Job skills training
- Mandatory parental classes

Key External Stakeholder Feedback

The CSE external stakeholders received the same survey as internal stakeholders. Responses from external stakeholders are organized below.

Factors that contribute to non-compliance:

- Limited education
- Criminal backgrounds
- Substance abuse
- Unemployment
- Underemployment
- Family relationships

Ultimate goal(s) of Child Support Enforcement Offices:

- To gain and maintain support for children.
- Fostering environment where paternity and support obligations can be establishment, collected, and distributed to the minor children/families served.
- To facilitate a family-centered approach while ultimately obtaining financial support for children so that all children have an opportunity to excel in life and, in turn, be productive members of society. Of course happiness and well-being are an important part of our American dream.

Challenges facing Child Support Enforcement Offices now and in the future:

- Increased demand for service
- Staff turnover
- Insufficient CSE staff
- Outdated technology
- Meeting performance standards

Ground breaking initiatives that would be beneficial to increasing compliance in Mecklenburg County:

- Workforce development
- Career readiness classes at community colleges
- Mobility/self-service projects (Kiosks for payment and filing paperwork)

Employees and Stakeholder Feedback Summary

Feedback is organized below, focused on the evaluation questions. Factors of non-compliance could be grouped as customer-based and internal to departmental operations.

Non-compliance Factors	
Customer-focused Factors	Operational Factors (internal)
Unemployment	High caseloads
Limited education of noncustodial parents	Insufficient staff
Illegal activity / Incarceration of noncustodial parents	Outdated technology (state systems)
Poor relationships between parents	
Generational poverty	
Lack of judicial enforcement	
Visitation restrictions set by custodial parents	

Feedback on actions or strategies to increase compliance are summarized.

Actions or Strategies to Increase Compliance
Employment resources for noncustodial as well as custodial parents / workforce development
Improved internal and external relationships (i.e. Social Security Office)
Enhanced call-center functions to manage caseworker distractions
"Mother's Initiative" to parallel Fatherhood programs
Better alignment of staff duties to improve efficiency, effectiveness
Mobility/self-service project
Changed policies and processes for walk-ins and missed appointments
Mandatory parental classes
Upper-management support for employees

Operational Analysis

Since becoming a County agency, CSE has undergone changes to staffing and process, grown in size and increased the volume of the work it does. All of these have a direct or indirect effect on the capacity to take new actions to increase compliance with support orders

So that evaluators could understand the department's organization and capacity, an overview of the department's operation was prepared by CSE senior employees and presented to evaluation staff in two separate meetings.

Subsequently, evaluation staff followed up with questions and additional discussions with employees within CSE and within supporting County departments. This review included capacity and resources available to the agency in the context of their customer base, peer agencies and recent performance.

Specific areas in this Analysis:

- Staffing
- Process Improvements
- Revenue Sources
- Workload and Performance
- Case and Customer Characteristics

Staff Organization

The main body of the CSE workforce is divided into an Operations and Program divisions (see staff organizational chart in Appendix D). All caseworkers are in the Program division.

CSE has eight caseworker teams (64 caseworkers) that are organized as follows:

- One Intake team (9 caseworkers)
- Six Generalist teams (45 caseworkers)
- One Interstate team (10 caseworkers)

Each team has a supervisor and a Team Lead position. Adding:

- Eight Supervisors
- Eight Team leads

CSE Caseload:

- Total cases (3/31/2015) = 36,434
- Total caseworkers = 64
- Average cases per caseworker at CSE: 569
- State Recommended Caseload: 325 cases per caseworker

For an organizational chart see Appendix D.

Process Improvements

Since becoming a County agency in 2010, CSE has worked to make changes and improvements to their work processes. The list below highlights some of those efforts.

2011 – 2012

Document Imaging This project moved case documents from paper to electronic format.

Qflow – The Qflow project instituted the monitoring of flows of customers who visit the office to reduce wait time, track visit purposes and allocate staffing appropriately.

2011 – 2013

Process Mapping – All CSE internal processes were mapped.

Compass – A database for tracking customer demographics and retrieve online documents.

2012 – 2014

Strategic Plan – Strategic goals were established and monitored so performance targets were achievable and decisions were data-driven.

Court-Processes Time Study – This project worked to reduce wait-time for customers.

2013 – Present

The **Service of Process Project** partnered CSE with the Sheriff's Office to allow deputies to scan documents directly to CSE or court data repositories.

Under Development

Court-Tracking Packet – This project will track the flow of court documents to improve self-assessment timeframes.

Capacity Analysis – A project to look at existing staffing level and workloads to establish an appropriate staffing level.

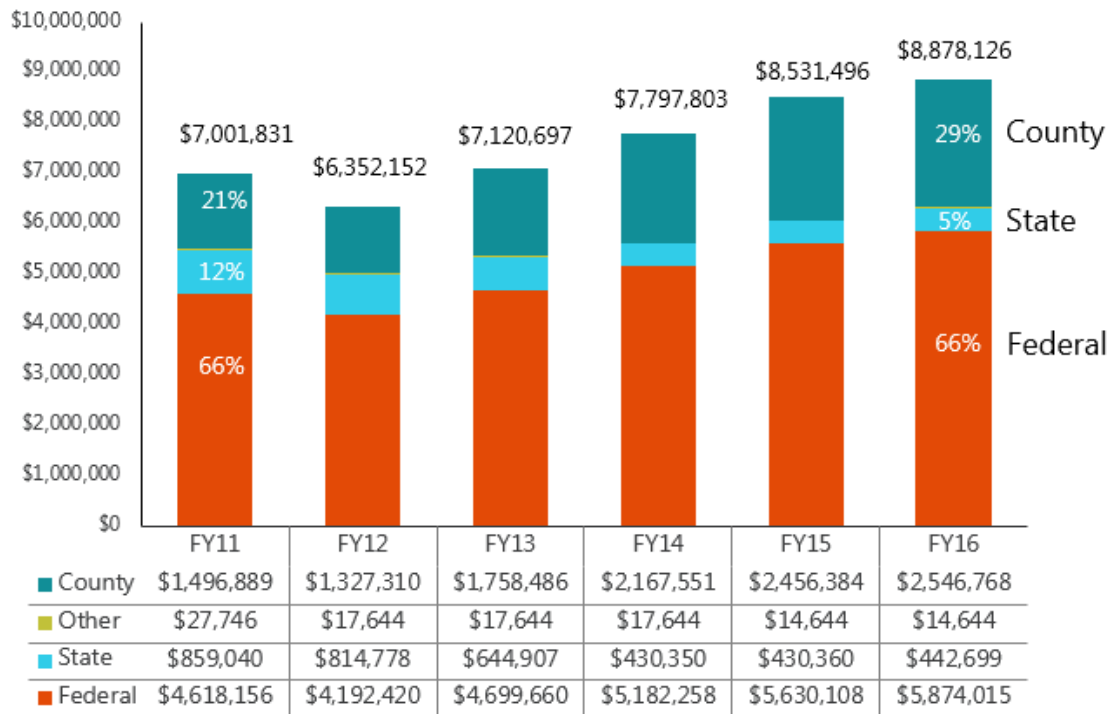
TurboCourt – Will allow for online application for services and uploading of required documents as well as electronic court filings.

Revenue Sources

Along with the move to becoming a County agency, CSE has experienced changes in revenues since 2010. While 66 percent of revenue for CSE has consistently come from the Federal Government, the share of State and County funds have changed since FY11 where the State provided 12 percent of CSE revenue and the County supplied 21 percent. By FY16, the County's share of revenue had increased to 29 percent and the State's share had fallen to 5 percent. (see chart on next page)

The total adopted budget for Child Support Enforcement was \$8,878,126 in FY16. That is an increase of 4.06 percent from the budget in FY2015.

CSE Adopted Budgets – Revenue Sources*



Source: OMB Analysis based on Adopted Budgets from FY11 to FY16.

*Note: Revenue figures do not take into consideration the return of incentive funds, which are received on a delayed schedule are not reflected in the adopted budget.

Workload and Performance

Mecklenburg has the highest population of North Carolina Counties as of the 2014 population estimates (see table below). A snapshot of the caseloads in urban counties as of the end of FY14 also shows Mecklenburg with the highest number of total cases.

District Support Collected Comparison 2015				
County Name	Population	Child Support Caseload (6/30/2014)	Caseload per capita	Child Support Collected*
Guilford	512,119	20,165	3.9%	75%
Durham	294,460	10,564	3.6%	70%
Wake	998,691	21,472	2.2%	68%
Gaston	211,127	10,103	4.8%	67%
Cumberland	326,328	21,173	6.5%	66%
Robeson	134,760	10,621	7.9%	65%
Forsyth	365,298	15,229	4.2%	63%
Mecklenburg	1,012,539	36,354	3.6%	62%

Sources: Sources: Census, 2014 population estimates.

North Carolina Department of Social Services, <http://www2.ncdhhs.gov/dss/local>

*From CSE state data warehouse reported in June 2015.

Of the largest jurisdictions in North Carolina, Mecklenburg County has had lower performance in collections compared to Durham and Guilford counties with both having collection rates in the range of 10 to 15 percentage points higher than Mecklenburg. However, Mecklenburg has had collection rates very close to Forsyth County in the last few years with both having collection rates just above 60 percent. Wake County has performed moderately better than Mecklenburg in collections in the last few years (6-8 percentage points higher), but Wake has a substantially lower case load for their case managers. As of FY2015, Mecklenburg's performance is very near the latest national figure for collections received (62.3 percent).¹⁶

Caseloads were consistently mentioned as an issue in focus group feedback from CSE employees. The table below shows how some urban districts in the state compare to Mecklenburg. Census data on population and poverty are shown to give context to the number and profile of cases for each district.

District Caseload Comparisons 2015					
County Name	Population	Persons below poverty level	Child Support Collected	Number of Caseworkers	Cases/caseworker
Durham	294,460	18.5%	70%	16	660
Mecklenburg	1,012,539	15.4%	62%	64	568
Cumberland	326,328	17.0%	66%	42	504
Wake	998,691	11.0%	68%	45	477

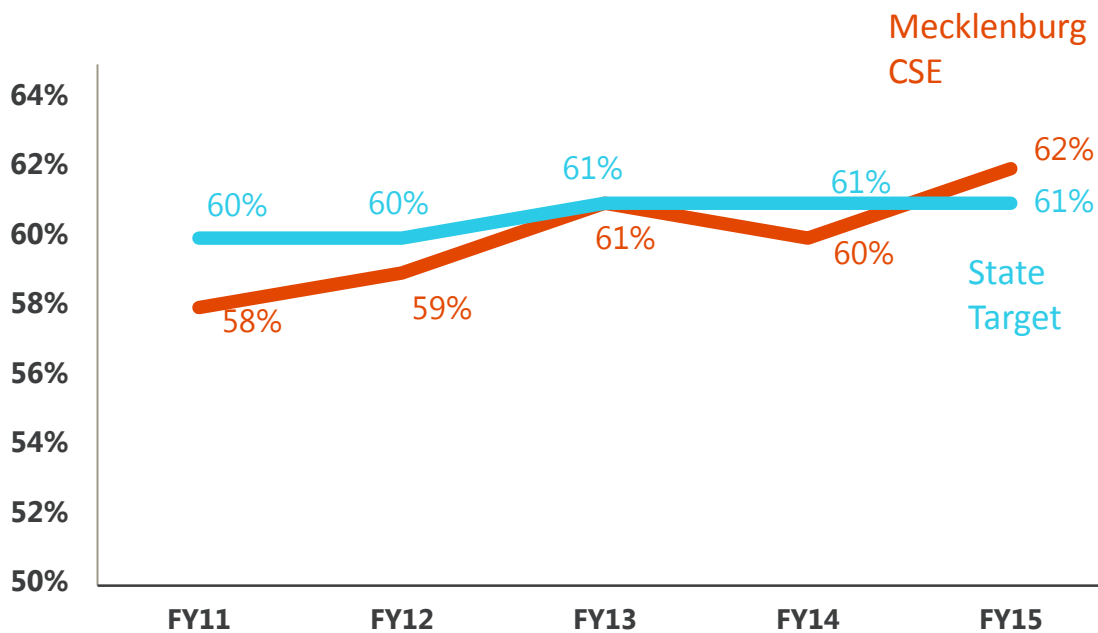
Mecklenburg. Sources: Individual agencies; North Carolina Department of Social Services, <http://www2.ncdhhs.gov/dss/local>. Population is from the Census 2014 estimates; poverty is from 2009-2013 Census.

Districts in the group shown above are all well above the state recommended caseload of 325 cases per caseworker. Among this group, Durham had the highest number of cases per caseworker at 660 cases/caseworker and Wake had the lowest at 477 cases/caseworker.

In spite of high caseloads and lower performance on support collected, Mecklenburg County's Child Support Enforcement Department performance has been improving. The department exceeded targets for each of its five performance measures in FY2015 and for the first time since becoming a County department. Shown below is the trend (FY11 – FY2015) for the collection rate performance measure compared to the State target rate.

¹⁶ Custodial Mothers and Fathers and Their Child Support: 2011, US Census Bureau

CSE Collection Rate Compared to State Target



Source: Federal Office of Child Support Enforcement via the NC Client Services Data Warehouse (OCSE-157).

Case and Customer Characteristics

Understanding the profile of cases and noncustodial parents interacting with Mecklenburg CSE is useful in the overall understanding of the department's operation. The chart below shows a snapshot of cases which were receiving public assistance from two points in time, June 30, 2014 and June 30, 2015.

Cases receiving assistance				
	As of 6/30/14	As of 6/30/15	Percent Change FY14-15	Percent of All Cases As of 6/30/15
Open Cases	36,354	35,789	-2%	--
Public Assistance (TANF) Currently	3,208	3,747	17%	10%
Public Assistance (TANF) Formerly	16,789	15,963	-5%	45%
Never Received Public Assistance	16,357	16,079	-2%	45%

Source: Federal Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE-157 data).

Approximately ten percent of CSE's cases receive public assistance. The percentage of cases on public assistance have increased while the total number of cases has declined slightly from 2014 to 2015. Further investigation did not yield an explanation for the increase in public assistance cases.

The literature contained multiple examples of using payments via electronic funds transfer as part of programs to improve compliance. Information detailing payment methods from current noncustodial parents is shown in the chart below. Several of the methods are electronic.

Noncustodial Parents' Payment Sources	%
Federal Tax Offset	27%
Employer Payment (withholding)	23%
Noncustodial Parent Payment	18%
Electronic Funds Transfer	11%
Other State	8%
State Tax Offset	4%
Court Ordered Purge Payment	4%
Other	4%

OMB Analysis of state data warehouse noncustodial parent data from June 2015.

Federal tax refunds are a large source of payments for Mecklenburg's Child Support Enforcement, making up 27 percent of payments, the single largest category, in that year.

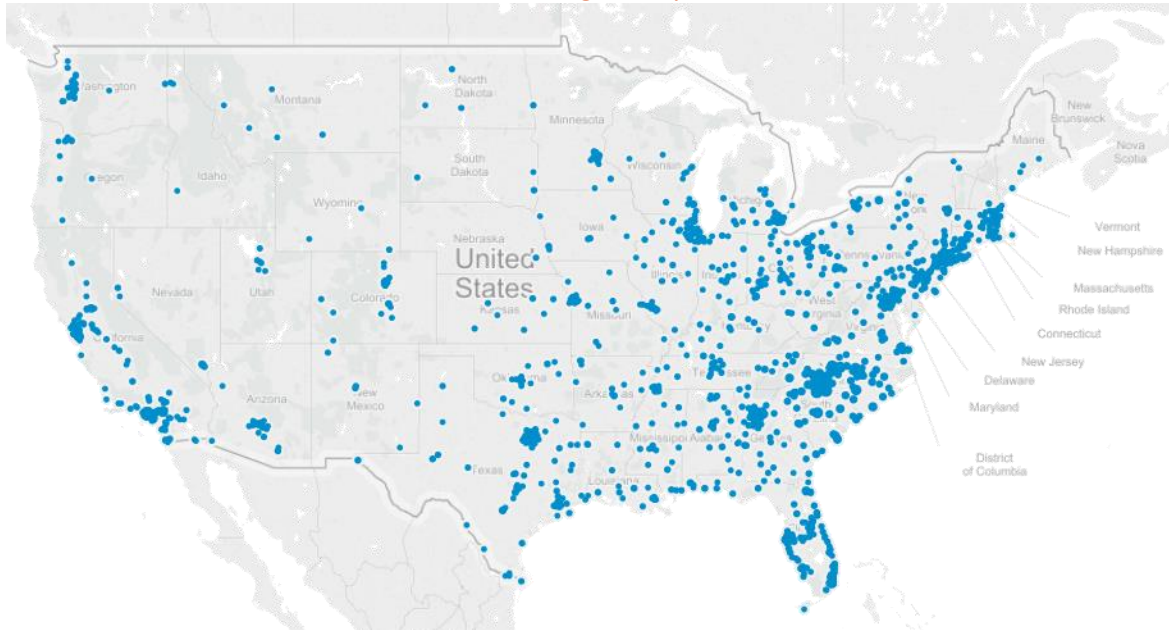
Demographic Characteristics of Noncustodial Parents

Another issue related to the demographic characteristics of noncustodial parents' compliance with support orders is location. Research showed that non-metro counties have higher compliance rates. Information from CSE staff also highlighted the challenges of collecting across state lines.

The number of cities reflected in the year's payments indicates that noncustodial parents are widely dispersed. From a list of 30,331 noncustodial parents in active cases in June of 2015, approximately 3,050 different city locations were shown within the United States. A small set of international cases are even more challenging for collections.

The map below reflects all the cities within the lower 48 U.S. states that were the reported location of Noncustodial parents in FY2015.

Cities with Noncustodial Parents on Mecklenburg County's CSE Active Cases, June 2015



Source: OMB Analysis of state data warehouse noncustodial parent data from June 2015.

Overall, Mecklenburg's noncustodial parents in active case files are demographically similar to national statistics, broadly, in that men are over-represented. The FY2015 dataset of CSE noncustodial parents showed these demographic characteristics:

- 94 percent were male
- 71 percent were African-American
- 12 percent white
- 7 percent Hispanic

Most of the remaining 10 percent are not identified in a racial group. Less than one percent is Asian or American Indian.

Current Strategies

Mecklenburg County's CSE Department employs numerous strategies to improve compliance with support orders that should be taken into account for this evaluation. This section highlights programs and initiatives already underway or being considered that align to the best practices seen in the literature as well as those suggested by employees or stakeholders.

Workforce and Employment

To allow for more direct involvement with noncustodial parents who need assistance in finding employment, two caseworkers within CSE are given lower caseloads to allow for higher levels of communications and services. This approach focuses on workforce and employment, however, it also uses strategies highlighted in the literature for case stratification, which uses additional case management intervention to improve outcomes.

The CSE Department has actively participated in the National Fatherhood Initiative, which provides resources and information to noncustodial fathers on a range of parenting issues as well as information about child support. As part of this program, some services to noncustodial parents are offered to enhance prospects for employment. Typically, these are workshops and resources for integrating parental skill-building into workforce development programs.

Modifying Child Support Orders

Recent North Carolina policy changes mandate proactive review of noncustodial parent requests for modification of their support orders. The changes are being incorporated into work flows by CSE as required by this policy change. To assist with efforts, CSE has recently added a Review and Modification Coordinator position.

Improved Service of Process

Improved service of process has been shown to increase compliance with support orders. The number of dedicated Child Support Sheriff's Deputies working on CSE service of process and related activities increased from two to six in FY2015. As a result, the department has improved the rate of successful service of process (serving of official court or legal documents). Further improvements to service of process are underway using technological solutions and process changes.

Improved Court Processes

The Court-Tracking Packet program tracks the documents by case that are required for court, and helps reduce waste and delays related to rescheduled court appearances.

The implementation of TurboCourt software allows online application for child support services, uploading of required documents electronically and electronic court filing. The system replaces a labor-intensive and manual process.

Other Operations Improvements

Since becoming part of the County, CSE has pursued both broad and incremental process and operational changes geared toward improved efficacy and effectiveness. The changes include

document imaging, a strategic operational plan, change to the generalist case management model and an additional case management team.

Current Strategies - Challenges

While there have been a number of programs and operational changes aimed at improving compliance with support orders, a recurring theme heard from employees is a high demand or perceived need for many of operational changes.

Summary of Finding

Based on the various methods used to answer the evaluation questions, the evaluators identified the following major **factors that directly contribute to non-compliance with child support orders in individual cases**:

The lack of income or money is the most likely reason for non-payment. This is followed, in order, by (1) disputes over visitation of the child, (2) feelings on the part of the noncustodial parent of a lack of control over how support payments are being spent, (3) claims that the child is not the noncustodial parents to support, and (4) claims by the noncustodial parent not to be responsible for the child's support.

Additionally, both external (customer) and internal (agency) factors were identified that **affect non-compliance generally**:

Customer Non-Compliance Factors:

- Unemployment
- Limited education of noncustodial parents
- Illegal activity / Incarceration of noncustodial parents
- Poor relationships between parents
- Generational poverty
- Lack of judicial enforcement

Agency Non-compliance Factors:

- High caseloads
- Outdated state system technology
- Insufficient staff

Actions and strategies used to increase compliance with child support orders included:

Programs to employ noncustodial parents, tailoring collection approaches based on differences in noncustodial parents, setting reasonable payments, and adjusting support orders. Specific, high-impact actions ranged from sending Noncustodial parents text reminders to geographically targeted enforcement using GIS technology.

Many of these research-based strategies identified in the literature are being implemented to some degree within CSE. There is, however, frustration that the scope of these efforts may be too small to achieve substantial improvements in compliance.

Internal issues for non-compliance included high caseloads, insufficient staff and outdated technology. Actions suggested included better aligning staff duties to improve efficiency, strengthening external partnerships and reexamining internal processes that hamper case work.

Recommendations

The secondary question in this evaluation (What factors directly contribute to non-compliance with child support orders in individual cases?) is covered in the preceding section, which includes detailed information on the internal and external factors that affect compliance with support, research and best practices as well as the internal operation and currently used strategies in the department.

Generally, the factors of non-compliance fall into two major groups:

- Issues facing the noncustodial parent customer population of CSE
- Internal CSE actions

Recommendations align with the primary question:

What action(s) could Child Support Enforcement take to increase compliance with child support orders?

Potential actions are affected by the internal and external resources available and range from lower-cost, faster tactical actions to higher-cost, slower-to-implement strategies.

This section of the report addresses the question of actions and strategies that will increase compliance and are organized by focus (on internal operational strategies or actions used with noncustodial parents) and required resources.

Resources	Internal Focus / Customer Focus
Tactical	Lower-cost, internal control, faster implementation
Strategic	Higher Cost, internal control, slower implementation
Collaborative	Requires external resources, partnership-based, more complex to implement

Tactical Actions

Internal

Review internal appointment and call policies. Feedback from employees suggested that managing caseworkers' time is critical with the high caseload.

Reviewing and adjusting policies and processes for appointments and incoming calls may alleviate distractions and better use of employees' time. Better time management and focused time for caseworkers should improve compliance.

Lower-cost,
internally
controlled
actions with
faster
implementation

Customer-focused

Create/update a **community map of services** for customers. Many customers have multiple needs that relate or contribute to the inability to pay support orders. Both to save employees' time, and as a resource to support other needs that are facing families, this tactical action will improve the likelihood that there will be resources to comply with support orders.

Strategic Actions

Internal

Engagement with the County's Human Resources - Learning and Development team on **departmental morale and work styles** was suggested to address concerns expressed by employees on how to effectively mitigate compliance issues due to low morale. Additionally, employees would like to focus on potential enhancements in group dynamics that could increase productivity.

Employment options for noncustodial parents: **Continue to monitor grant opportunities** for employment programs. National studies indicate in the upcoming year Federal Government programs will begin a focus on this area of grant-making.

Higher-cost,
internally
controlled
actions with
slower
implementation

Customer-focused

Work with the County's Information Technology Department to **investigate low-cost methods to integrate text or email reminders-to-pay**, as doing so will reflect other programs that have been implemented nationally.

Collaborative Actions

Internal

Enhance **cooperation strategies** with the **Social Security Office** to address non-compliance issues.

Expand **partnerships with existing recruitment/employment agencies** (private and non-profit). Invite agencies to an informational session - conducted by CSE – on creating a shared vision and buy-in.

Continue to leverage existing work with Employer Roundtable and form a joint committee with City/County Human Resources and other organizations that conduct **job fairs**.

Form a joint committee to include County, City, private and others to help focus the public's attention on the issues of unemployment, limited education, visitation disputes and poor relationships between custodial and noncustodial parents, and work towards solutions.

Have County **Human Resources conduct a review of frontline and supervisor employee alignment of duties**. Coordinate this with the planned capacity modeling project that is ongoing to get best idea of expected maximum capacity for staff. Consider additional staff requirements informed with the results of these two efforts.

Research show among group of urban North Carolina counties, the ratio of caseworkers to overall staffing is very close to Mecklenburg County's CSE department ratio. However, it is reasonable to conduct a more in-depth review of staff duties to understand the effectiveness of the staffing model for CSE. There may also be value to understand how other jurisdictions compare to CSE in terms of staffing and assignments of duties. For instance, one could ask the question, what number of employees who are credentialed to perform case management duties but do not carry active caseloads?

Considering that a large number of new processes and policies have changed since the CSE department became part of County government, it is reasonable to review the current frontline structure to determine if additional efficiencies can be obtained within the current staffing levels.

Customer-focused

In collaboration with GIS and Mecklenburg County Sheriff's Office, develop test case for **targeting geographic areas** where there are concentrations of noncustodial parents who have not complied with support orders (see Bench Warrant initiative, Lancaster PA).

Requires
external
resources,
partnership-
based, more
complex to
implement

Continue involvement with efforts to **develop employment resources for noncustodial parents**. As the County investigates ways to involve groups like the County's Economic Development Department and others in efforts around employment and workforce, it will be important that CSE remain engaged and active in those efforts.

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A Practical Guide: Making Child Support orders Realistic and Enforceable, National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, 2008

A Study of Reasons for Non-Payment of Child Support by Non-Custodial Parents, Western Michigan University 2015

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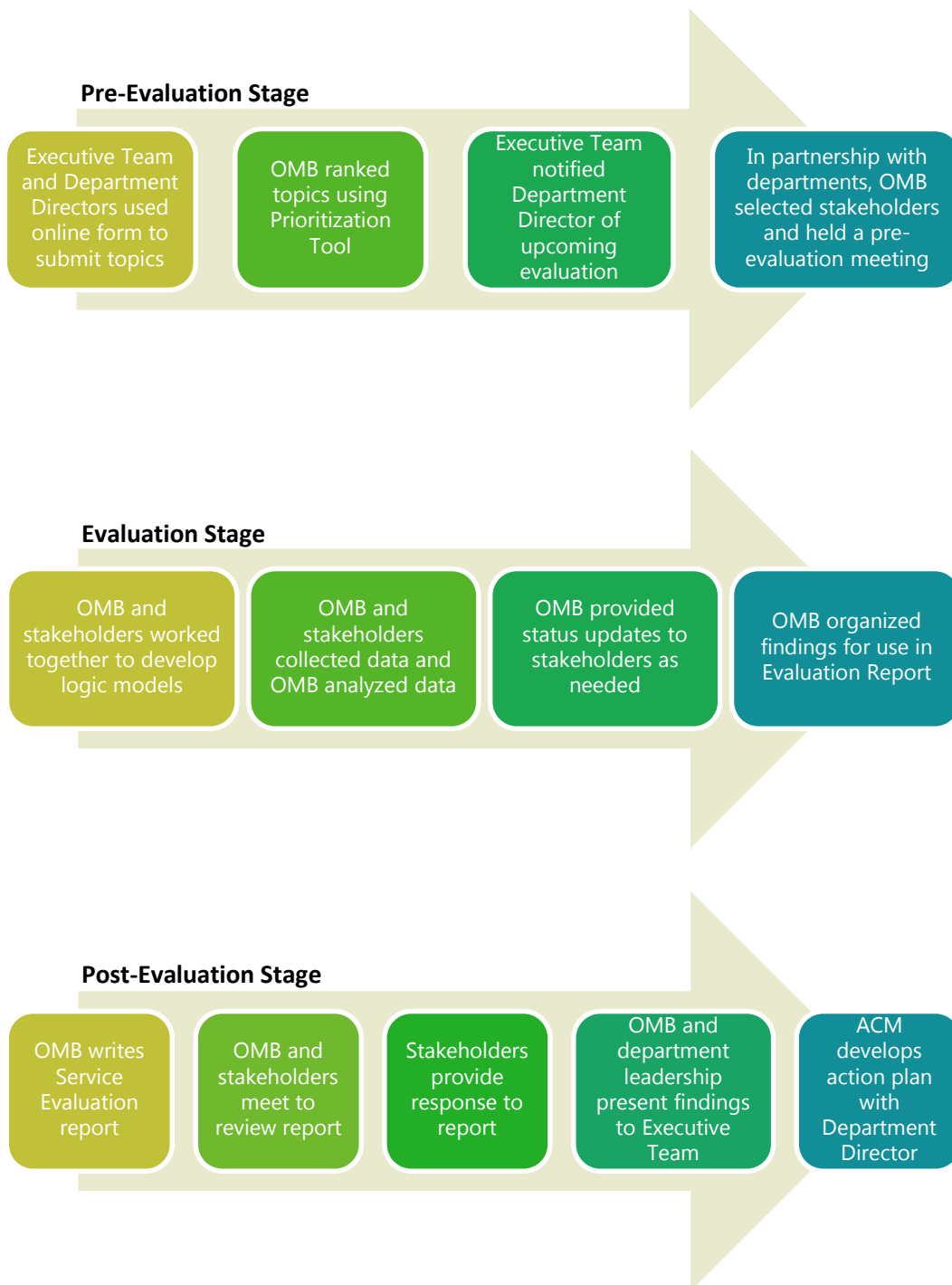
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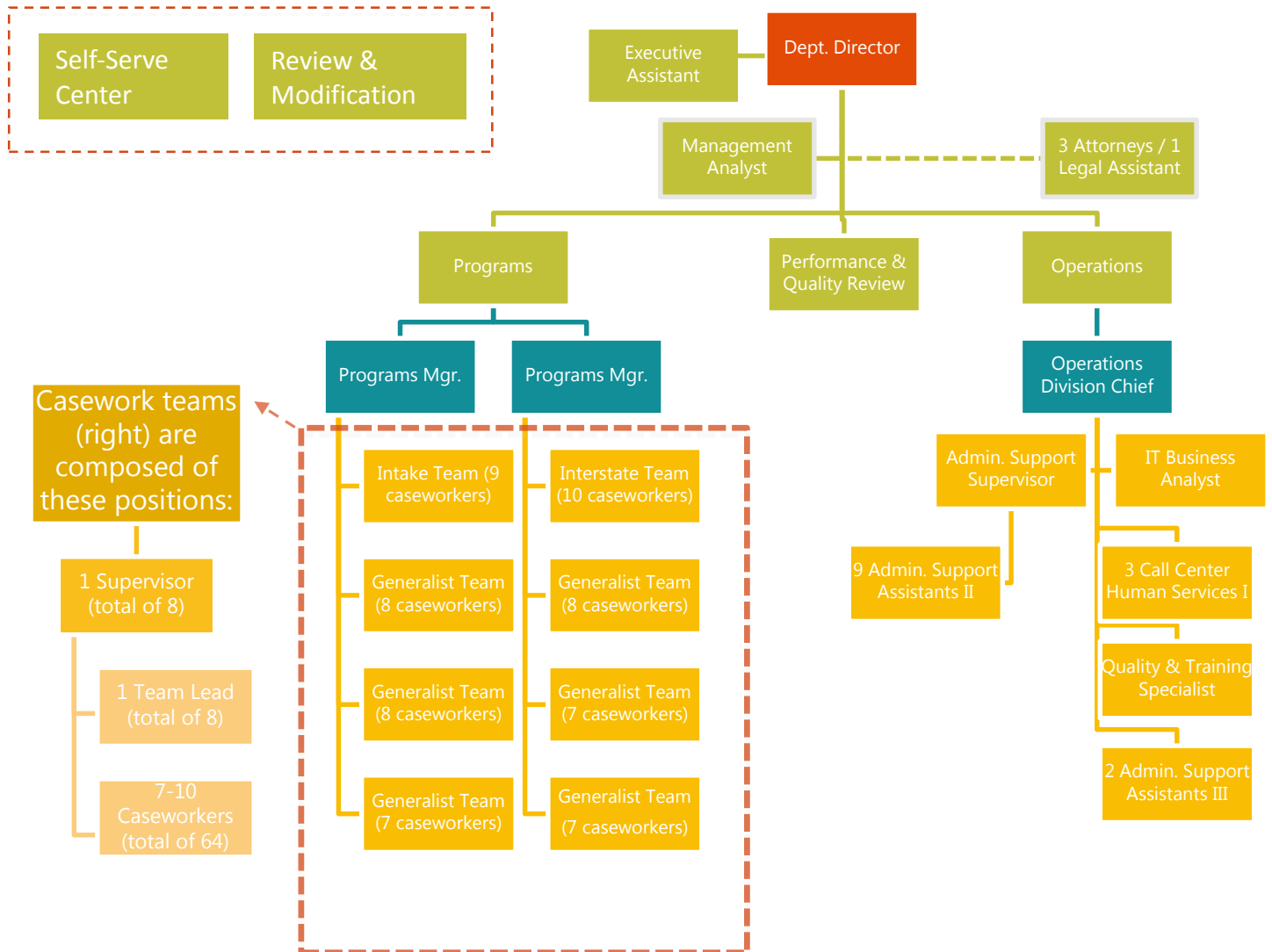
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Appendix A: Evaluation Process



Appendix B: Organizational Chart



Appendix C: Stakeholder Survey Instrument

Survey Questions

Mecklenburg County's Office of Management and Budget is currently conducting a service evaluation of the Mecklenburg County Child Support Enforcement Office (MCCSE). You were identified by Joan Kennedy, the director of CSE, as a key stakeholder.

The service evaluation is focused on identifying 1) actions that the office can take to increase compliance with child support orders and 2) factors that contribute to non-compliance.

Currently, MCCSE has initiatives in place to increase compliance. Initiatives include the Fatherhood initiative (promotes family self-sufficiency) and Noncustodial Parent Orientation (provides a supportive environment for men to receive answers and support from Child Support Enforcement employees and community partners).

Internal stakeholders:

We are asking for your feedback on Child Support Enforcement efforts in order to inform the evaluation. All responses will be grouped and your responses will not be identifiable in the final report.

Please take a few minutes to respond to the following questions.

1. Based on your knowledge of Child Support Enforcement, what factors contribute to non-compliance?
2. What should be the ultimate goal(s) of Child Support Enforcement Offices?
3. What challenges do you see Child Support Enforcement Offices facing now and in the future?
4. What resources can you provide us or point us towards that will benefit this evaluation?
5. Are you aware of any ground breaking initiatives that would be beneficial to increasing compliance in Mecklenburg County?

External stakeholders:

We are asking for your feedback on Child Support Enforcement efforts in order to inform the evaluation. All responses will be grouped and your responses will not be identifiable in the final report.

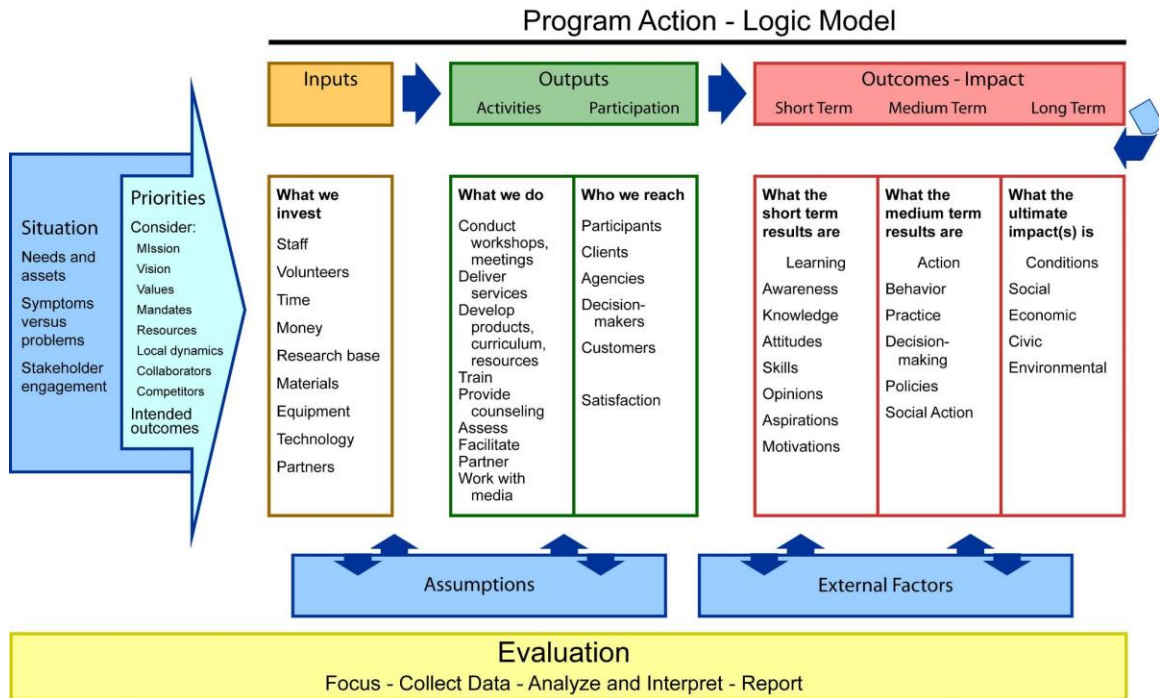
Please take a few minutes to respond to the following questions.

1. Based on your organization's work with Child Support Enforcement, what factors contribute to non-compliance?
2. What should be the ultimate goal(s) of Child Support Enforcement Offices?

3. What challenges do you see Child Support Enforcement Offices facing now and in the future?
4. What resources can you provide us or point us towards that will benefit this evaluation?
5. Are you aware of any ground breaking initiatives that would be beneficial to increasing compliance in Mecklenburg County?



Appendix D: Logic Model



Source: University of Wisconsin – Extension, Cooperative Extension, Program Development and Evaluation.